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THE MARCH TO THE SEA:
THE OPERATIONAL ROLE OF SHERMAN'S RIGHT WING

by

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Newport, Rhode Island

March, 1986

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED		1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS	
2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY		3. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT Distribution unlimited	
2b. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE			
4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S) 85-33		5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)	
6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION Advanced Research Program	6b. OFFICE SYMBOL <i>(If applicable)</i>	7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION	
6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Naval War College Newport, RI 02841-5010		7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)	
8a. NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION	8b. OFFICE SYMBOL <i>(If applicable)</i>	9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER	
8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS	
		PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.
		TASK NO.	WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.
11. TITLE (Include Security Classification) The March to the Sea: The Operational Role of Sherman's Right Wing			
12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) SCHWABE, F. EDWARD, JR., MAJ, USA			
13a. TYPE OF REPORT FINAL	13b. TIME COVERED FROM _____ TO _____	14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) 1986, Mar ,	15. PAGE COUNT 62
16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION			
17. COSATI CODES		18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) March to the Sea; Sherman's March; the Right Wing; Savannah Campaign; Strategy; Civil War; Georgia; Civil War	
FIELD	GROUP	18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) March to the Sea; Sherman's March; the Right Wing; Savannah Campaign; Strategy; Civil War; Georgia; Civil War	18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) March to the Sea; Sherman's March; the Right Wing; Savannah Campaign; Strategy; Civil War; Georgia; Civil War
19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) Examines the operations of Sherman's 15th and 17th Corps during the march through Georgia in the Fall of 1864, with emphasis on their respective roles in support of Sherman's strategy. The study focuses on the role of the march within the context of overall Union strategy, the special preparations for the movement to the coast, and the actions of the 15th and 17th Corps during the latter two-thirds of the march (23 November-10 December, 1864). The operations of the 15th Corps are particularly emphasized to highlight its role in forcing the rapid collapse of Confederate opposition in front of Sherman's advance. The author recognizes the limitations of the needs of Sherman's strategy as it is contrasted with the reality of the situation in which the author finds himself. He wishes to explore this issue.			
20. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS		21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED	
22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL Head, Advanced Research Program		22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) 401-841-3304	22c. OFFICE SYMBOL 30BA

DD FORM 1473, 84 MAR

83 APR edition may be used until exhausted.

All other editions are obsolete

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE

* U.S. Government Printing Office: 1988-630-012

0102-LF-014-6602

UNCLASSIFIED

Abstract of

THE MARCH TO THE SEA: THE OPERATIONAL ROLE OF SHERMAN'S RIGHT WING.

Examines the operations of Sherman's 15th and 17th Corps during the march through Georgia in the Fall of 1864, with emphasis on their respective roles in support of Sherman's strategy.

The study focuses on the role of the march within the context of overall Union strategy, the special preparations for the movement to the coast, and the actions of the 15th and 17th Corps during the latter two-thirds of the march (23 November-10 December, 1864). The operations of the 15th Corps are particularly emphasized to highlight its role in forcing the rapid collapse of Confederate opposition in front of Sherman's advance.

The study concludes that though largely ignored and overshadowed by the actions of the left wing and Union cavalry, the accomplishments of the right wing (particularly the 15th Corps) were a more important validation of Sherman's strategic gamble. After feinting toward Macon, the 15th and 17th Corps "disappeared" into a sparsely settled wilderness--marching unopposed for over one hundred miles through some of the poorest regions of Georgia. But its movements during this period served to fragment and paralyze Confederate efforts to delay Sherman's advance, and played a significant role in enabling the Union Army to rapidly gain the coast and to open communications with the U.S. Navy.

At the same time, the study defines the logistical needs of Sherman's army as its greatest vulnerability--one which the Confederates were unable to exploit.

PREFACE

Much has been written about the March to the Sea. It remains not only an immensely interesting historical event in its own right, but still serves as a campaign worthy of study by modern military professionals. Its relevance is highlighted by a review of only a few of the themes which it illustrates:

- (1) The concept of a large, mobile army operating free of a fixed base, with only intermittent communications.
- (2) The use of sea control and coastal bases to supply and support a land campaign.
- (3) The use of cavalry and reconnaissance forces to shield the main body and to deny accurate intelligence to the enemy.
- (4) The use of feints and demonstrations to cause the enemy to react in a predictable way.
- (5) The moral questions concerning the protection of noncombatants, the control of a hostile population, and the attendant leadership demands at small-unit level.

From the standpoint of the defender, Sherman's march is equally rich in relevant themes:

- (1) How can a numerically inferior force most effectively halt or delay a large enemy advancing in multiple columns?
- (2) When do the logistical needs of a large force become its greatest vulnerability and how can this be exploited?
- (3) How can accurate information on the movements of large enemy forces best be gained?
- (4) Should small forces be further subdivided to engage the enemy in guerrilla-style attacks or should they be concentrated to defeat a portion of the enemy force in isolation?

This study does not attempt to explore these themes. It is an effort, first, to complete the record of the campaign itself. The study will suggest that, in addition to the strategic insights which are traditionally derived from a study of Sherman's march, the campaign may offer useful operational insights as well. By defining the operational role of the right wing, further work should be possible.

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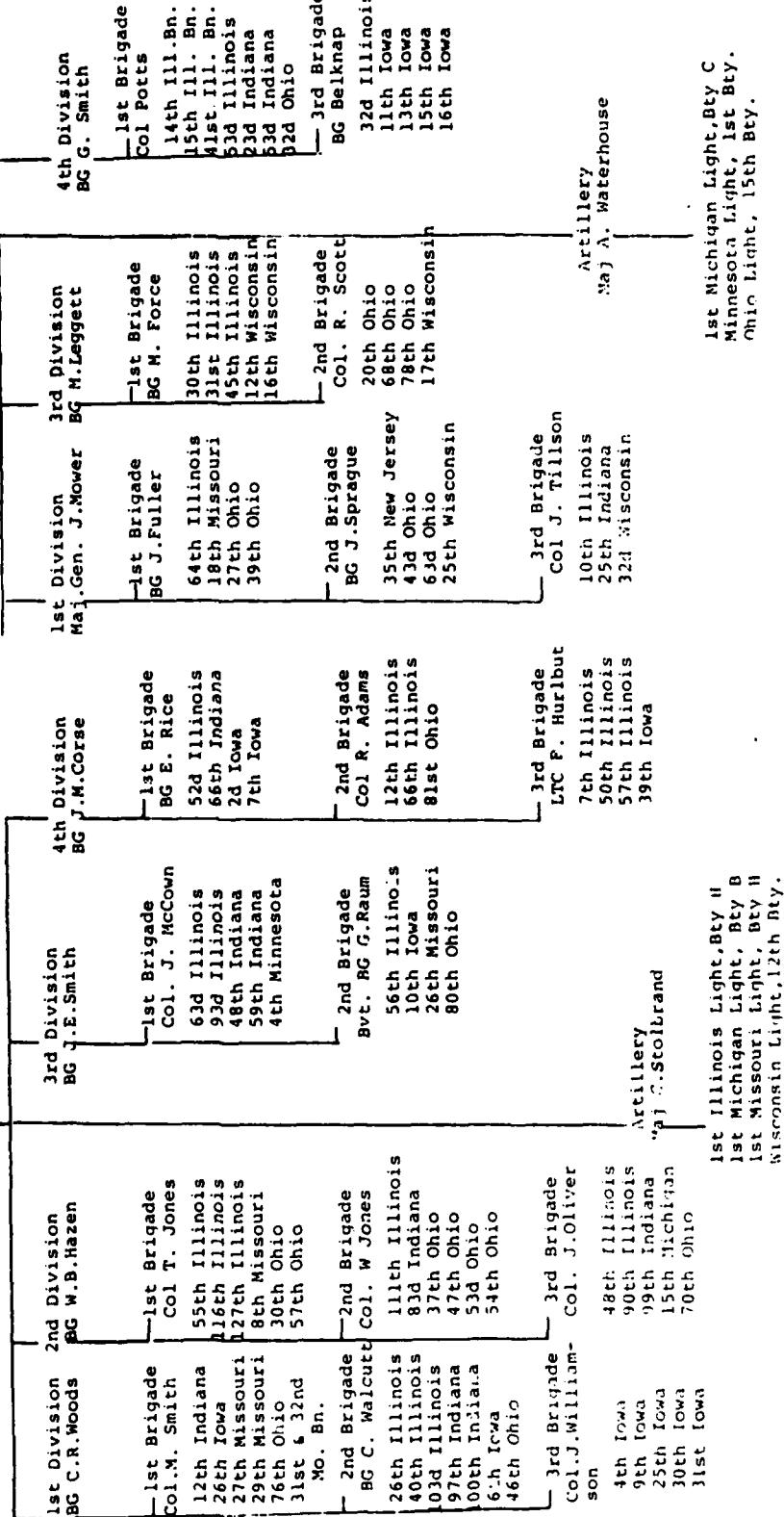
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***** ORGANIZATION OF SHERMAN'S RIGHT WING *****

Army of the Dept. of Tennessee
Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard
(27,626 officers & men)

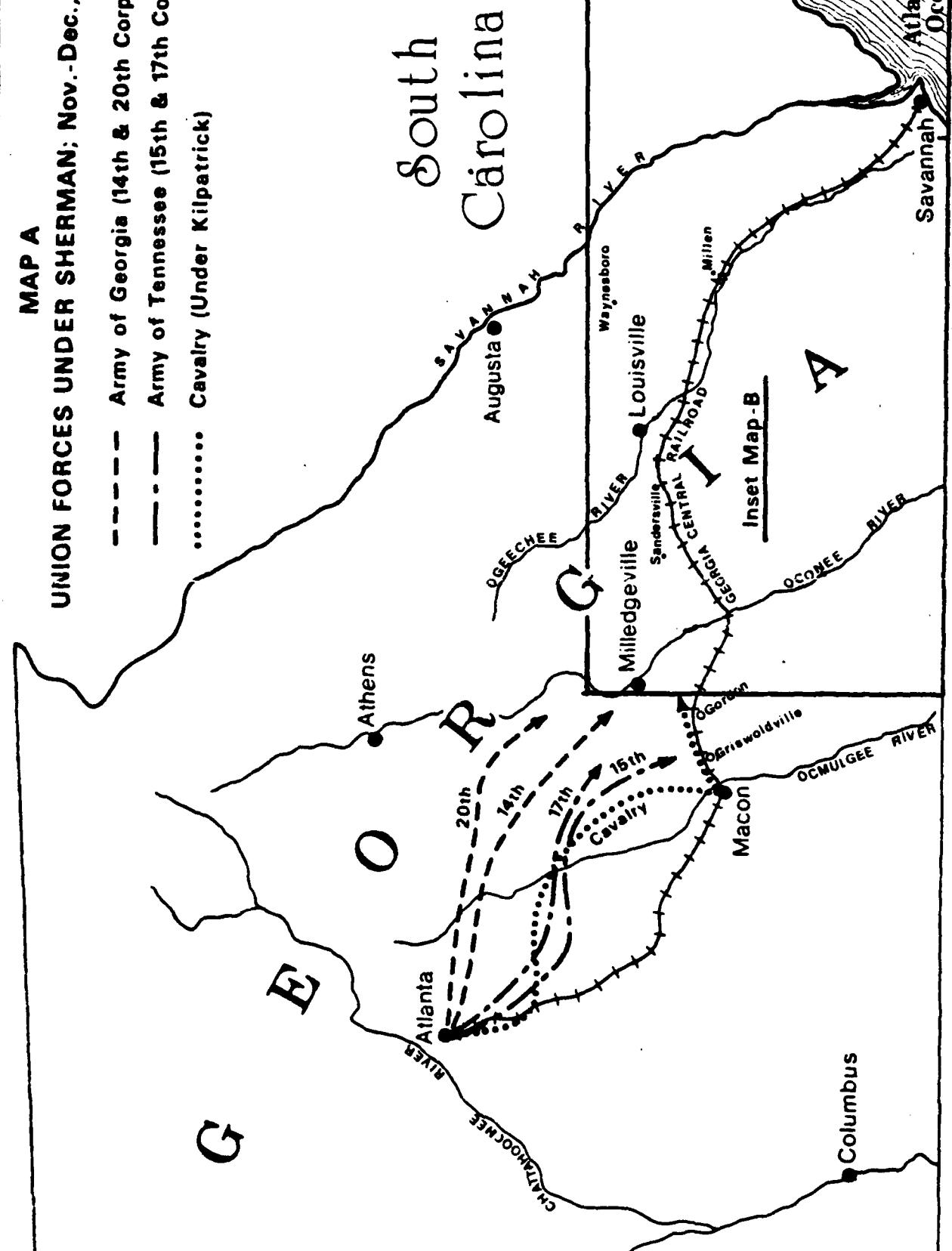
15th Corps (15,894)

Maj. Gen. P.J. Osterhaus



MAP A
UNION FORCES UNDER SHERMAN: Nov.-Dec., 1864

- — — Army of Georgia (14th & 20th Corps)
- — — Army of Tennessee (15th & 17th Corps)
- Cavalry (Under Kilpatrick)



THE MARCH TO THE SEA: THE ROLE OF SHERMAN'S RIGHT WING

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sherman's march through Georgia in the Fall of 1864 was, at the time, a unique event. A vast army turns its back on the enemy, cuts its own lines of communication and supply, and marches over 250 miles through a hostile country to the coast. Its success, and the success of the subsequent march through the Carolinas, brought a rapid end to the long Civil War and has attracted the attention of military historians ever since.

But too often the March to the Sea, an altogether unconventional campaign, has been viewed in conventional terms by concentrating on the skirmishes which took place along the route. In this sense the 14th and 20th Union Corps, the left wing of Sherman's army, have tended to receive the lion's share of attention. These two corps, along with Sherman's cavalry, were engaged almost exclusively with the meager Confederate forces which were hastily assembled to confront the Union army. The other half of Sherman's army, the 15th and 17th Corps, marched essentially unopposed and have largely been ignored. Only recently have their movements and exact routes of march been determined,¹ and their operational role remains overshadowed by the more exciting actions of the left wing.

After feinting towards Macon and skirmishing at Griswoldville (Nov. 22), the right wing "disappeared" into the interior wilderness of Georgia. For over 100 miles the 15th and 17th Corps marched through some of the poorest regions of the state. While their comrades in the left wing, marched through the breadbasket of the Confederacy, through wealthy counties which had been settled since colonial times, the right wing forced its way through vast "pine barrens" with countless swamps and sloughs, served by faint roads or no roads at all. As one Illinois soldier wrote: "No one wondered why the Confederates didn't fight much for that part of the country. It warn't worth it."²

This was the kind of march that Jefferson Davis had hoped for. Rallying the people of Georgia, he predicted that Sherman's army would become lost in the wilderness. Threatened by starvation, delayed and harrassed by guerilla tactics, Sherman would emerge on the coast like a hunted animal.³ In this sense it was the right wing, particularly the 15th corps which was to prove Davis wrong. While the successful skirmishes of the left wing were tactically important, it was the accomplishments of the right wing which were to validate Sherman's novel concept: that a large Union army could move at will, through the heart of the Confederacy, free of its lines of supply, bringing the horrors and deprivations of war to every doorstep.

CHAPTER II

THE MARCH TO THE SEA AND UNION STRATEGY

In order to appreciate the role of the right wing it is necessary to view the March to the Sea within the overall context of Union strategy. The capture of Atlanta, in September, 1864, provided a much needed boost to northern morale. Coming on the heels of Farragut's victory at Mobile it meant that two of the goals of Grant's strategic plan for 1864 had been achieved. Nevertheless Lee continued to frustrate Grant at Richmond and Hood's Confederate Army of Tennessee had managed to escape Sherman after the fall of Atlanta. Sherman had two choices: he could turn away from Atlanta to chase the elusive Hood, or he could move further into Georgia to the coast and then north through the Carolinas to pressure Lee. Of the two courses, Grant favored the former, Sherman the latter.

Sherman argued strongly that to maintain the offensive he must be allowed to march into Georgia, forcing the Confederates to react to him and not the reverse. He was convinced that Jefferson Davis wanted Hood to lure the Union Army away from Georgia and that made Sherman even more determined to stay.¹ Certain that he would be unable to catch Hood's smaller, faster army, he continued to badger Grant about a march through Georgia.

Grant sent Sherman a conditional approval on October 11th but remained worried about Hood's intentions. On November 1st, in a message to Sherman, he was having second thoughts:

Do you not think it advisable, now that Hood has gone so far to the north, to entirely ruin him before starting on your proposed campaign? With Hood's army destroyed you can go where you please with impunity. ... If you can see a chance of destroying Hoods army, attend to that first, and make your other move secondary.²

Sherman wrote two dispatches in return, assuring Grant that General Thomas with the Army of the Cumberland, reinforced with some of Sherman's forces and others, could deal with Hood if the latter attempted to invade Tennessee adding:

No single army can catch Hood, and I am convinced that the best results will follow from our defeating Jeff Davis' cherished plan of making me leave Georgia by maneuvering.³ ...If I turn back, the whole effect of my campaign will be lost.⁴

The same day Grant gave his final consent, but also advised that:

Hood's army, now that it has worked so far north, ought to be looked upon as "the object". With the force, however, that you have left with General Thomas he must be able to take care of Hood and destroy him. I do not see that you can withdraw from where you are to follow Hood without giving up all we have gained in territory. I say, then, go on as you propose.

U.S. Grant, Lieutenant General⁵

It is little wonder that Sherman had difficulty persuading Grant. In war, a commander's objective is almost always the destruction of the opposing army. Once this is accomplished the enemy no longer has the means to resist. That Sherman should

turn his back on Hood and march off across the Georgia countryside not only ran counter to conventional principles of military strategy, but it was fraught with great risks.

Leaving the stolid and methodical Thomas to cope with the reckless, aggressive Hood must have given Grant pause enough. But from a larger perspective, should Sherman fail in the march to the sea, the new Union momentum, so recently gained at great cost with the capture of Atlanta, would falter. Southern hopes that the war-weary North would give up the struggle, could be sustained a little longer.

But Sherman, as much as anyone, understood the risks and knew the frailty of the North's war-time psychology. In August, at the height of the battle of Atlanta he had watched hundreds of veteran soldiers leave his army for home as their three-year enlistments expired. He understood that for the South the war was total--with most of the population, old and young, supporting the conflict for its duration. He wrote his wife:

It looks hard to see regiments march away when their time is up. On the other side they have everybody, old and young and for indefinite periods. I have to have also along the railroad a large force to guard supplies. So that I doubt if our Army much exceeds that of Hood. No recruits are coming, for the draft is not until September and then it will consist mostly of niggers and bought recruits that must be kept well to the rear. I sometimes think our people do⁶ not desire to succeed in war. They are so apathetic.

A week later he continued in the same vein:

The people of the North always have slackened their efforts to uniform our Army when reinforcements are needed then break out when it is too late. I suppose such will be the case this year. The whole South is now armed and the whole North should be, every man that can carry a musket.⁷

As long as the South could continue to maintain its armies on the strategic defensive, the war of attrition would grind on. Sherman believed that unless the war could soon be brought to an end, the Northern will to continue would eventually fail.

Balanced against the risks of failure, a march through Georgia offered great strategic rewards. It would strike at both the means (resources) and the will of the southern people to continue the rebellion. If it succeeded it would split the Confederacy again, as the capture of Vicksburg had done the year before, and allow Sherman to pressure Lee by moving north through the Carolinas. Besides crippling vital military resources, the march would bring the reality of war to the heart of the South and demonstrate that the Confederacy was unable to protect its people.

But the two central questions remained: Could Thomas handle Hood? Could the march itself be accomplished? These questions were left for Grant and Lincoln to ponder as Sherman prepared to move.

CHAPTER III

PREPARATION FOR THE MARCH

The idea of an army cutting loose from its lines of supply was not entirely new to Sherman. Grant had used it in the Vicksburg campaign and Sherman had tried it at Chattanooga, on the Meridian raid, and briefly during the battle of Atlanta. But never before had it been attempted on such a scale. To move such a large army (62,000 men, over 3,000 wagons, 20,000 horses and mules, and several thousand head of cattle) through a hostile territory for over 250 miles was an undertaking of a different magnitude.

There was another important distinction. Where it had been tried before, on a smaller scale, there had always been a secure base to turn back to, if all else failed. Such was not the case here. Sherman could not afford to garrison Atlanta, guard the rail line back to Chattanooga, and provide Thomas with additional forces to hold off Hood. Atlanta and the lines of supply to Chattanooga would have to be destroyed. If Sherman ran into trouble on the way to the coast, Chattanooga would be his nearest base of supply. Once he disappeared into the interior of Georgia he could not simply turn around and "come out by the hole he went into" as Lincoln suggested in December to a friend who had worriedly inquired about Sherman's whereabouts.¹ Without a base of supply, living off the land,

Sherman's Army would be like a swarm of locusts--always needing to move forward to new sources of food and forage. If the army was stopped or forced to turn back on itself it would starve.*

Food and forage were the elements critical to the success of the march. The Army had to be able to maintain a steady rate of advance--not so slow that food supplies became exhausted, but not so fast that the destruction of railroads and other military targets could not be thoroughly done. The Army had to be organized to facilitate movement, to brush aside enemy efforts to impede the advance, and to rapidly overcome the many natural obstacles which lay between Atlanta and the coast.

Sherman's intent was to march for Savannah, capturing the State Capitol at Milledgeville and destroying the important Central Georgia Railroad along the way. With Hood's Army threatening Tennessee, he was reasonably sure that opposition to his army in Georgia would be slight. Whatever forces the Confederacy could bring against him would have to be pieced together from the Georgia militia and whatever else could be spared. Nevertheless, Sherman knew that he could ill afford to be stopped for very long. Both Macon and Augusta were important manufacturing centers for the Confederacy and Sherman believed they would be defended. In order to divide and immobilize the enemy he planned to feint towards both cities while driving between them to Savannah.

*Even with widespread and industrious foraging by large parts of his command, Sherman's army would exhaust the food and forage in its immediate vicinity in about 48 hours. (Henry I. Smith. The History of the 7th Iowa Infantry, p. 303)

By early November, Sherman had trimmed his army to four corps, a division of cavalry, about 65 pieces of artillery, and several battalions of engineers equipped with pontoon bridging. He organized the four corps into two wings. The left wing (14th and 20th Corps), commanded by Major General Henry Slocum, would move southeast to threaten Augusta. The right wing (15th and 17th Corps), commanded by Major General Oliver Howard, would move south to threaten Macon. (See Map A). The cavalry, under Brigadier General Judson Kilpatrick, would move initially with the right wing on Macon. The artillery was divided equally between the two wings as were the engineer bridging units. Each wing had about 900 feet of bridging which could be further assigned to the individual corps.²

The four corps were to march on parallel routes, more or less abreast, creating a broad front which at times exceeded sixty miles. This would insure that a large area was constantly available for food, enable the greatest use of what roads could be found, and make it difficult for an enemy force to oppose any part of the army without the risk of encirclement. With Kilpatrick's cavalry employed on the flanks, and moving on such a broad front, communication between the two wings and among the individual corps became the responsibility of several companies of cavalry (and in some cases, mounted infantry) attached to the left and right wings.

The plans for feeding the army along the way appealed to the logistician in Sherman:

The feeding of an army is a matter of the most vital importance and demands the earliest attention of the general entrusted with a campaign. To be strong, healthy and capable of the largest measure of physical effort the soldier needs about 3 pounds gross food per day, and the horse or mule about 20 pounds. When a general first estimates the quantity of food and forage needed for an army of 50 or 100,000 men he is apt to be dismayed... An ordinary wagon drawn by six mules can be counted on to carry 3,000 pounds net--equal to the food for a regiment of a thousand men for one day, but by driving along beef cattle, a commissary may safely count the contents of one wagon as sufficient for two days food for a regiment of a thousand men and as a Corps should have on hand food for twenty days it should have 300 wagons, as a provision train, and for forage, ammunition, clothing and other necessary stores it was found necessary to have 300 more wagons, or six hundred wagons in all [for each Corps].

Determined to travel light, Sherman sent north to Chattanooga all unnecessary wagons, mules, and horses. The wounded, sick and lame were also sent north and each regiment was restricted to one wagon and one ambulance.⁴ Brigade commanders were allowed enough wagons to provide 10 days rations and three days forage. Divisional and corps commanders maintained enough wagons to carry an additional 10 days supply of rations so that the army, at least in theory, had twenty days supply for the march.* Additionally, double rations of coffee

*Several corps departed with less. The 14th Corps, last to leave Atlanta, had only seven and one-half days supply in its wagons. But its route of march lay through some of the wealthiest agricultural regions of Georgia. It arrived before Savannah having drawn only three and one-half days rations from its original supply. (Official Records, Report of Maj. Gen. Jeff C. Davis, 14th Corps, Vol 44, p. 167.)

and salt were to be carried and herds of beef cattle were to accompany each wing to provide fresh meat along the way.

The balance of what was needed would be taken from the land. In his general orders published 9 November, 1864, Sherman instructed his army to forage liberally on the countryside. For this purpose brigade commanders were authorized to form foraging parties, commanded by officers, who were to "gather, near the route traveled, corn or forage of any kind, meat of any kind, vegetables, corn meal or whatever is needed by the command."⁵ Foraging parties were also empowered to appropriate horses and mules to serve as pack animals, and the artillery and cavalry were also authorized to replace their mounts from whatever stock was available along the route.⁶

In his search for food and resources in Georgia, Sherman was aided by a unique map--prepared for him by the Chief of the Census Bureau, Joseph C. Kennedy. Early in the war, sensing that the Union armies would be forced to operate on extended lines of supply, he had requested from Kennedy a map which recorded the population, and chief products produced in each county, based upon the information supplied in the 1860 census.⁷ Just such a map became the basis for planning, offering a wealth of detail on the agricultural production of each county along the proposed route. Furthermore, the timing of the march--just after the Fall harvest, seemed perfect. During September, Governor Joseph E. Brown had recalled the Georgia State Militia from Hood's Army just to gather and put away the crops. So important was the harvest that year that much of the land had been diverted from

cotton and nearly all planted in corn and other grains. Intended for Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, it was to feed Sherman's instead.

With the hindsight of 125 years it is easy to examine the Georgia Agricultural Map of 1861 and predict where forage and food might become scarce. North of the Ogeechee River along the Central Georgia Railroad the rich counties of Baldwin, Washington, Jefferson, Burke, and Screven together boasted more than a half million acres of improved land which had been untouched by the war. This area, through which the left wing was to march, represented much of the agricultural wealth of central Georgia--and indeed the Confederacy. (See Map B, p.46)

The area south of the Ogeechee, destined to feed the right wing of the army, was much poorer by comparison. The larger but less productive counties of Wilkinson, Johnson, Emanuel and Bulloch could boast only a little more than half the white population of the area to the north, but more importantly, less than one fourth the number of slaves. The counties to the north of the river outproduced their southern neighbors by factors of two and three to one in corn, wheat, oats, swine, and horses.*

The experience of the two wings would prove the value and accuracy of the Census Bureau's work. The 14th and 20th Corps found themselves almost wastefully supplied. On the other hand the right wing, and particularly the 15th Corps, found a poorer country and one that they were happy to put behind them.⁸

*Information from this map is at Appendix I, page 46.

CHAPTER IV

THE MARCH:

The Feint Toward Macon

By the 12th of November Sherman's Army stood free of its lines of communication--having destroyed much of the railroad from Atlanta northward toward Chattanooga. The movement of the Army began on November 15th. With the city of Atlanta in flames, the right wing, with Kilpatrick's cavalry in advance, began the march on Macon. The left wing moved eastward, tearing up the railroad toward Augusta. Seven days later the two wings converged--with the right wing striking the Central Georgia Railroad at Gordon, and the left wing moving in and around Milledgeville. (Map A)

The results of the first phase of the march could not have been more pleasing to Sherman. The capital of Georgia was in Federal hands, and his movements had thoroughly confused his Confederate opponents. Sherman's departure from Atlanta had produced a flurry of telegrams between Jefferson Davis, Governor Brown and Confederate Generals Pierre Beauregard, and Richard Taylor. In Georgia, the only forces available to slow Sherman's advance were Wheeler's Cavalry Corps, made up of 13 under-strength brigades, and a division of the Georgia Militia commanded by Major General Gustavus Smith.⁹

Beauregard initially ordered Lt. Gen. Taylor, commander of the Department of Alabama and Mississippi, to move to Macon with all available forces and take command.¹⁰ But it soon became apparent that Taylor had few forces and that he might not be able to reach Macon before Sherman. Lt. General William Hardee at Charleston was then notified that his department was forthwith expanded to include all of Georgia as far west as the Chattahoochee River and that he was to take charge at Macon.¹¹

Wheeler's cavalry had been in contact with the right wing since the 16th and had initially reported Sherman with three corps and about 35,000 men. By the 18th, the 14th Corps, which had been the last to leave Atlanta, was detected and Confederate leaders began to realize the full import of the march--particularly as reports were heard of the amount of destruction along the route. On the 19th, Hardee arrived in Macon--the same day that the left wing's movement on Augusta became known. By the 21st it became obvious to Hardee that either Augusta or Savannah was Sherman's objective. Declaring Macon no longer in danger, he ordered all available forces at Macon to be sent to Augusta and ordered Major General Lafayette McLaws, commander of the garrison division at Savannah, to send the necessary railroad cars to transport them.¹² But it was already too late. Screened by Kilpatrick's cavalry, the right wing, with the 15th corps on the right flank, was moving astride the railroad at Gordon. (Map A)

On the 22nd, the division of Georgia militia marched east from Macon towards the railroad, but ran into Walcutt's Brigade of the 1st Division, 15th Corps, near the village of Griswoldville. In the battle that ensued, the militia was badly defeated by Sherman's veterans.* With the Union army astride the railroad, Macon was cut off from communications with Augusta and Savannah.

On the same day important information had fallen into Union hands. A forager from the 47th Ohio (Hazen's 2d Division, 15th Corps) had captured an unarmed courier carrying a message from Hardee to Wheeler. The message declared Macon out of danger and outlined Hardee's plan to move forces to Augusta. It confirmed that Hardee himself was moving to Savannah and ordered Wheeler to get in front of Sherman's army, and to place himself between Augusta and the Union army, if Sherman threatened that city. The courier was taken to General Hazen who recognized Hardee's handwriting and pronounced it genuine.¹³

Consequently, events were in motion on the Confederate side much in accord with Sherman's future plans. On the 23rd, with the feint toward Macon complete, Sherman brought Kilpatrick's cavalry across to the left flank and communicated with his wing commanders. Howard was ordered to continue with the right wing south of the Georgia Central Railroad, while Slocum with the left, was to push forward north of the railroad, through

*

Though greatly outnumbered, the men of Walcutt's Brigade had Spencer repeating rifles and were able to fight from behind hastily constructed breastworks. The Georgia militia, many of whom were young boys and old men, were marched across an open field in a frontal assault on the Union position.

Sandersville toward Millen - about 100 miles distant. Here Sherman hoped to liberate thousands of Union prisoners held at Camp Lawton. Kilpatrick would demonstrate towards Augusta and occupy Wheeler while the interior corps of each wing would work to systematically destroy the railroad as the army marched.

Up to this point, the army had made daily marches of 10-15 miles, forage and food had been plentiful for both wings, and except for some rain and a rare snowfall on the 22nd, the weather had been good. Each corps marched with one brigade (reinforced with a battery of artillery) as an advanced guard. The main column followed, consisting of the remaining brigades of the lead division, a second infantry division, the batteries of the artillery brigade, and then the rear division - which reinforced its rear brigade with a battery of artillery.

The corps ordinance train was distributed so that each regiment was followed by a wagon of ammunition. The supply train of each division was normally distributed among the brigades and followed in their rear. The advance and rear guard brigades, however, traveled unencumbered by trains. Behind each brigade was a provost guard to pick up stragglers. When closed-up, in good order, the corps column would occupy over five miles of road. On bad roads with the attendant delays, the column could easily stretch 10 to 15 miles in length. Sherman ordered his commanders to march their soldiers off the road through the fields and woods, giving the road over completely to the trains. During halts or delays wagons were ordered to continue to move, doubling up along the road. Broken-down wagons

pulled out of line, empty wagons were burned, and every effort made to keep the column in motion.*

Typically, the advance brigade, (followed closely by a pioneer battalion to clear obstacles and widen the road) would march at 7 A.M. with the trailing brigades moving by 9 or 10 A.M. Under ideal conditions, camp would be reached by early afternoon with the advance elements halting first and the trailing units passing forward--ready to assume the advance for the next day.

Foraging parties from each brigade which had been operating out from the flanks of the column, would attempt to rejoin the line of march--waiting along the road with the food and forage collected for the evening meal. These foraging parties would wait until their brigade supply wagons were passing and then transfer their produce to their brigade quartermaster.**

* This method of movement was largely maintained and has been credited with enabling the army to move as rapidly as it did over the narrow and difficult roads of Georgia. See Belknap, W. History of the 15th Regiment, Iowa Volunteer Infantry, (Keokuk, Iowa, 1887). Belknap was a brigade commander in Blair's 17th Corps.

** This was the way the system was supposed to work. Much has been written about the "resourcefulness" of Sherman's "bummers" (foragers) on the march. Those who were properly led, avoided the depredations which were often attributed to Sherman's troops. Corps, division and brigade commanders issued numerous orders against looting, and the unauthorized burning of structures. But evidence suggests that below regimental level, officers and noncommissioned officers (most of whom were elected by their men) allowed discipline to break down. Houses were ransacked, much personal property stolen, and homes indiscriminately burned.

Foraging parties served a second purpose. Operating as much as five or ten miles from the flanks of the column, they provided additional protection for the main body. Confederate cavalry frequently attacked foragers believing that they were driving in the Union skirmish line.

The Feint Toward Augusta

On the evening of the 23d, the Army stood ready to begin the next phase of the march in the general direction of Millen. The Army's axis followed the Central Georgia Railroad across the Oconee and Ogeechee Rivers. For the right wing the nature of the campaign was about to change. The focus of operations had shifted to the left wing along with Kilpatrick's cavalry. The enemy, or most of it, had also vanished. Wheeler had crossed the Oconee south of Macon and was on his way to Sandersville. The Georgia militia was moving by a roundabout route to Savannah--going south by train to Albany, and then marching 60 miles overland to the Savannah and Gulf railroad at Thomasville.

Up to this point, the experiences of the men marching with the left and right wings had been similar. But from the Oconee River on, the routes to be traveled by the two wings would

Wheeler's cavalry was also living off the land--not having received a regular Confederate ration in five months, nor been paid for nearly 12 months. Ordered to destroy food and forage in Sherman's path, Wheeler's men were oftentimes as feared by Georgia's citizens as were Sherman's. The cumulative effect of both armies ravaging the countryside was immense.

contrast sharply. The 14th and 20th Corps would cross areas of the state which had been settled since colonial times. The towns of Milledgeville, Sandersville, Louisville, and Waynesboro, represented much of the wealth of central Georgia. Road networks, while not extensive were more numerous, maps more reliable, and bridges and crossing sites well-known. The farms and plantations in the path of the left wing promised ample quantities of food and forage.

By comparison, the 15th and 17th corps stood poised at the edge of a wilderness. To the east, across the Oconee, lay more than a thousand square miles of "pine barrens"--vast tracts of poor, sandy soil covered with pine forests and drained by four major rivers* and numerous creeks, streams, swamps and sloughs. Carved into large counties 50 years before by an ambitious state legislature, it had failed to attract many settlers in the early days of westward expansion.

The role of Howard's right wing would be to get through this country as rapidly as possible--always prepared to swing north to flank Confederate forces attempting to delay along the railroad. But Howard had to get his army across the Oconee first, and this was to prove, in his view, the most difficult crossing of the march.¹⁵

*The Oconee, Ohoopee, Ogeechee, and Cannouchee Rivers. (See Map B).

The Skirmish At Ball's Ferry

On the evening of the 23rd Howard ordered his two corps to advance to the river. Major General Frank Blair's 17th Corps was ordered to cross the river at a point known as Jackson's Ferry--some two miles north of the Oconee railroad bridge. Major General Peter Osterhaus and the 15th Corps were ordered to cross at Ball's Ferry, about eight miles further south.¹⁶ The pontoon bridge train was divided between the two corps to provide each the capability of laying its own bridge.*

Howard's advance elements, consisting of a battalion of the 1st Alabama (Union) Cavalry reinforced with an infantry brigade,** reached the Oconee railroad bridge on the 23rd. Finding the near side of the bridge guarded by a stockade, about two miles forward of the river, the cavalry drove in the rebel pickets and forced its evacuation. The infantry, brigade pushing on to the river, found a second stockade guarding the immediate approach to the bridge. Two regiments were deployed along with one cannon which was maneuvered by hand down the railroad itself--the approaches being limited by the swampy ground. After a short skirmish the second stockade fell, and the near side of the bridge was in Union hands.¹⁷

* Pontoons were wooden boat frames, covered with canvas, each with its own wagon for transport. The boats were launched into the water, alligned side by side, with wooden planks placed over the top--making a sort of floating roadway. By this stage of the march each corps had sufficient boats to contruct about 300 feet of bridging--sufficient to cross any obstacle en route save perhaps the Savannah River itself.

**

1st Brigade, 4th division, 17th Corps.

Meanwhile, the Union cavalry had continued down the west bank until they reached Ball's Ferry. Here they were able to cross the river (about 200 feet wide at this point) but after proceeding a short distance, were attacked by a strong force. They held their position until their ammunition was expended and then withdrew with the loss of 21 killed and wounded.¹⁸

The cavalry had learned that the enemy was preparing earthworks at Ball's Ferry. At the same time, Blair had determined that Jackson's Ferry no longer existed and that the only suitable crossing for the 17th Corps south of Milledgeville was at Ball's Ferry. Consequently, by the morning of the 24th Howard had ordered Blair to continue south to try to cross alongside the 15th Corps.¹⁹

The Confederate attempt to oppose a crossing had begun a few days earlier with a small detachment sent up the railroad from McClaw's Division in Savannah. Arriving on 19 November, this small group was reinforced on the next day, and was made up of about 100 infantry and 50 cavalry under the command of Major A.L. Hartridge.* Hartridge began to gather militia and any other volunteers he could muster. Among these were 20-odd artilleryists who had been cut off from their commands. McClaws was asked to send artillery forward by rail from Savannah.²⁰

On Nov. 21, Hartridge's band was further reinforced by about 450 infantry, 60 cavalry, and four pieces of artillery under the command of Major General Henry Wayne, Adjutant and

* Hartridge was the commander of Cobb's Guards, McClaws Div.

Inspector General of Georgia. Having fallen back before the Union advance on Gordon, he assumed command of all Confederate forces at the Oconee railroad bridge and at Ball's Ferry.²¹ Wayne was further reinforced on Nov. 22, by the 4th Kentucky Infantry (mounted) which had been sent from Wheeler. Consequently, the force opposing Sherman had grown to roughly 1000 men from assorted commands. These were divided between the railroad bridge, under the direct supervision of General Wayne, and Ball's Ferry, where Hartridge commanded. It was Hartridge's force which repulsed the Alabama (Union) Cavalry at Ball's Ferry on the 23rd. It was Wayne's force, including 145 cadets from the Georgia Military Institute, which confronted elements Brigadier General Giles A. Smith's 4th division, 17th corps, from the east side of the railroad bridge.

On the 24th, with both corps moving towards Ball's Ferry, Howard continued to demonstrate against the bridge with the 53rd Indiana Regiment relieving the 23rd Indiana that morning. Three companies from that regiment kept up a brisk fire throughout the day and at dark attempted to set fire to the bridge. This was met by heavy musketry and cannon fire from Wayne's force which caused the attempt to be defeated. However, much of the trestle work leading to the bridge had been set ablaze on the 23d, and was now partially destroyed.²²

The next day (Nov. 25th) Wayne and his band continued to hold the bridge and Ball's Ferry. Running low on ammunition, and concerned that Kilpatrick and elements of the left wing had already crossed the Oconee at Milledgeville, his position was

becoming untenable. By midday the leading elements of the 15th Corps arrived at Ball's Ferry. General Hazen, in the advance with the 2nd Division, deployed two regiments* and a battery of the 12th Wisconsin Artillery against Hartridge's force on the opposite side. While this demonstration was in progress, the 17th corps which had arrived at the river, organized a 200 man detachment to attempt a crossing several miles north of the Confederate position, with the intent of attacking its flank.

The swiftness of the current prevented the building of a pontoon bridge directly toward the far bank. Howard's chief engineer, Captain C.B. Reese supervised the construction of a length of bridge along the near bank which was then swung out into the current at a given signal. By means of this "flying ferry", the 200 man detachment, successfully crossed about dusk. Led by Lieutenant Colonel Kirby of Blair's staff, it found itself in thick swamp. Throughout the night it advanced with great difficulty, arriving at dawn on the Confederate position - only to find it abandoned.²³

Howard ordered each corps to establish pontoon bridges across the Oconee and, once across, to construct parallel roads through the swamp to high ground. The approach to the bridge-site was through swampy ground for about 3 miles, and much work was required to "corduroy" * the road for the trains.

*The 57th and 116th Illinois Regiments.

**To corduroy a road, men in the pioneer corps cut trees, used fence rails or railroad ties - whatever materials might be at hand- to place in the road bed for support. Frequently, in the Georgia swamps, the first row of "planks" would disappear in

By late morning on the 26th, the pontoons were in place and by early afternoon the first units of both corps were crossing the river. The first to cross the 17th Corps bridge was the Alabama (Union) Cavalry--moving north to burn the Oconee Railroad bridge. The remainder of the 17th Corps completed crossing by the end of the day and the next morning (Nov. 27th) the 1st Division was sent north to the railroad to destroy the track as far east as station 14 (Oconee). The remainder of the Corps moved to Irwin's Crossroads. (Map B)

The larger 15th Corps* took longer to cross and was considerably scattered by nightfall on the 26th. Two divisions, the 1st and 4th, had managed to cross during the day and marched all the way to Irwin's Crossroads, camping there for the night. Of the remaining two divisions, Brigadier General William B. Hazen's second division had managed to cross but had gone into camp just two miles from the river. The 3rd Division under Brigadier General John E. Smith, had been unable to cross and was forced to camp in the swamp on the west bank. A number of factors would combine to plague the movements of the 15th Corps during this next phase of the march--making the extended dispositions on the 26th seem more the rule than the exception.

the ooze, requiring a second layer to be cut and placed on top of the first. While this procedure helped the wagons, it occasionally proved hazardous to horses and cattle as hooves could slip between the planks, resulting in broken legs.

*The 15th Corps had four divisions (15,894 men) compared to three divisions (11,732 men) in the 17th Corps.

The March through the Wilderness

On the morning of the 27th, as the various divisions of the 15th and 17th Corps were concentrating at Irwin's Crossroads, Howard received a message from Sherman, who had reached station 13 (Tennille) with the 20th Corps. The message contained additional instructions for the movements of the next phase.

With a view toward forcing a crossing of the next river obstacle (the Ogeechee), Sherman informed Howard that he was pushing two divisions of the 14th Corps towards Louisville. He wanted Howard to move the 17th Corps just south of Williamson Swamp Creek (map B) prepared to cross the Ogeechee at either Sebastopol (station 10) or Burton (station 9.5).^{24*} Whichever corps achieved the crossing, the effect would be to turn the Confederate defensive line along the river. Sherman planned to personally accompany the 17th Corps.

The 15th Corps was to travel by roads further south, guarding the right flank of the army. This promised to be no easy task as the roads south of the 17th Corp's route were poor, the area was virtually a wilderness, and forage was already becoming less plentiful. Howard decided against trying to move the large 15th Corps on one route, and divided it into two columns of two divisions each. The columns would move abreast of each other and parallel to the route of the 17th corps to the north. March objectives were planned so that the divisions of

* Station depots of the Georgia Central Railroad were numbered based on their distance from Savannah. Station 10 was 100 miles from Savannah, Station 9.5 was 95 miles, etc.

the corps could camp each night within supporting distance of each other.* Howard marched with the northernmost column (1st & 4th Divisions) leaving the other column (2nd & 3rd Divisions) with Brigadier General Osterhaus, the Corps Commander.

As these orders were being written (mid-day, 27 Nov.), the two trailing divisions of the 15th Corps (Hazen and Smith) had just reached the vicinity of Irwin's Crossroads--Smith's Division having crossed the river at 8 AM that morning. To complicate matters, three brigades from the leading divisions (Corse and Woods) had just been dispatched northward, in accordance with orders already received, to destroy the railroad as far east as station 13 (Tennille). Brigadier General John M. Corse, commanding 4th Division, and Brigadier General Charles R. Woods, commanding 1st Division, were ordered to move the remainder of their commands to a joint encampment north of Irwin's Crossroads in order to be ready for the next morning's march.²⁵

The evening of the 27th found the 15th Corps as scattered as the night before with the 1st Division (Woods) at Riddleville, the 4th Division (Corse) at Widow Peacock's (Map B) and both the 2nd (Hazen) and 3rd (Smith) Divisions encamped at Irwin's Crossroads. Of the three brigades sent to destroy the railroad, one (belonging to Woods) had returned to the 1st Division at Riddleville. The other two, belonging to Corse, were still on the railroad, encamped at Tennille. Though it could scarcely be imagined at the time, the 15th Corps would not

*Supporting distance: about 3 miles between divisions.

be together again until it reached the outskirts of Savannah, nearly two weeks later.

On November 28th, both corps moved east, the 17th Corps marching comfortably along the Old Savannah Road, its divisions marching in column, alternating the advance each day. Sherman joined the corps in the afternoon, and the march along the south side of the Ogeechee for the next several days was almost pleasant--with few enemy, good weather, and plenty of forage.

By contrast, the 15th Corps disappeared into the vast tracts of forests and pine barrens. Marching on dim settlement roads, through remote areas, forage became less abundant, maps were unreliable and it was easy to become lost.

The march objectives that Howard had selected were Johnson's Crossroads and Summerville. While both appeared on the maps of the day, Sherman's men could find no one who had heard of Johnson's Crossroads, and Summerville was a tiny settlement of a few families - another 20 miles further through the wilderness. Writing in his diary on November 28th, Major Charles Wills, commanding the 103d Illinois Regiment (1st Division) described the march:

I think the Division has been lost most of the day - we follow old Indian trails 4/5ths of the time

And the next day he continued:

All day in an awful pine forest, hardly broken by fence or clearing...never saw such a lonesome place... not a sign of animal life, but the shrill notes of a frog... and no vegetable life but just grass and pitch pine. 26

The typical comments of the soldier in the ranks were less poetic. From a private in the 81st Ohio:

This Brigade [2d Bde, 4th Division] has been led through the most God-forsaken country I have yet seen. The whole route is through an immense pine forest with a swamp every mile of the way.²⁷

And from a soldier in the 7th Illinois: "the entire Corps is thrown into confusion and [the Generals] ...are lost in the pineries."²⁸

If the generals of the 15th Corps were not exactly sure where they were, then neither were the Confederates. On November 30th, when Sherman crossed the 17th Corps to the north side of the Ogeechee, Wheeler became convinced that all of Sherman's forces were north of the river.²⁹ Indeed, Hardee would not learn until Dec. 4th that large forces were still churning through the country, well south of the river and in excellent position to outflank Confederate defenses along the railroad.

Hardee, Bragg at Augusta, and McClaws in Savannah all depended on Wheeler's reports for their assessments of Sherman's movements and intentions. But Wheeler was so heavily engaged with Kilpatrick during the last days of November that he lost touch with the movements of Sherman's Army as a whole. Notified by Hardee on the 29th that the roads leading to Savannah would be made impassable, he left only one brigade* to operate on Sherman's front. With the bulk of his forces he moved to protect the approaches to Augusta and to fall on Sherman's left flank and rear.

*Lewis' Brigade reinforced by the 4th Tennessee Regt.

In fairness to Wheeler, this move had been ordered by Hardee.³⁰ But the result, for the next five days, would be to rob the Confederate generals of a clear picture of Sherman's movements and cause them to believe that Savannah might not be the enemy's objective.

Hardee and Bragg had good reason to worry about Sherman's intentions. If the Union Army chose to ignore both Savannah and Augusta and elected to force a crossing of the Savannah River, it was feasible that all three cities--Savannah, Augusta, and Charleston--could be cut off from Richmond. This move would allow Sherman to join forces with the Union command of Major General John G. Foster on the South Carolina coast and trap Hardee's forces in Savannah at the same time.*

Fear of such a move had been heightened on Nov. 27th when it was reported to Hardee that Sherman's cavalry had crossed the Savannah River at one of the ferries about 20 miles south of Augusta.³¹ This report was later proven false but it served as a plausible introduction to a second alarming development--the Federal attack on the Charleston and Savannah Railroad.

This expedition was ordered on November 29 by General Foster, commander of the Union forces headquartered at Beaufort, S.C., as a move which would be beneficial to Sherman. This threat to Savannah's principle means of communication and only line of withdrawal, preoccupied Hardee from Nov. 30th onward and served to divert resources from the efforts around Savannah.

* As early as 28 Nov. Bragg had cautioned the Confederate Secretary of War J.S. Seddon that such a move was possible.

The trains carrying Smith's Georgia Militia, which had just arrived from Macon on their roundabout journey through south Georgia, were quickly shunted through to the Charleston Railroad. They arrived in time to repulse a Union attack on the railroad near Grahamville, S.C. and held off further advances until relieved by reserves from North and South Carolina on December 1st. But the Union pressure on Savannah's lifeline continued.

Wheeler reported on November 30th that Sherman and the 17th Corps had crossed to the north side of the Ogeechee River. Believing that the entire Union army was now north of the river, this seemed further confirmation that the enemy was turning toward the Savannah River, attempting to join Foster's command in South Carolina. Sherman's feint toward Augusta was succeeding masterfully. Both Wheeler and Bragg remained transfixed by that prospect until December 5th, by which time the Union infantry was less than 45 miles from Savannah.

An accurate picture of the movement of Sherman's corps would have allayed the fears of the Confederate generals. More than one-fourth of the Federal Army was still marching deep in the pine barrens well south of the Ogeechee. But accurate intelligence south of the river was not forthcoming--and if it was, it did not reach Wheeler. The 15th Corps was "lost"--presumed by Wheeler to be marching north of the Ogeechee between the 14th and 17th Corps.^{32*}

*As late as 8 December, Wheeler continued to believe that the force on the south side of the Ogeechee was small--probably cavalry. (Wheeler to Bragg, Official Records, Vol. 44, p. 941.

The Role of the 15th Corps

Sherman's crossing of the Ogeechee with the 17th Corps did not signal the beginning of a turning movement. It was a move designed to flank expected opposition along the line of the Ogeechee at Station 10 (Sebastopol).³³ But Kilpatrick's cavalry and elements of the 14th Corps had already forced a crossing to the north at Louisville on the 28th. This had turned the line of the Ogeechee and on the next day (29th) a division of the 14th Corps* was ordered south to Sebastopol to uncover the crossing for the 17th Corps.^{34*}

Sherman elected to move the 17th Corps a further five miles east to Burton, station 9.5, **crossing the Ogeechee during the late afternoon and evening of 30 November. At the same time, the 15th Corps was concentrating in and around the tiny settlement of Summerville. Howard moved the 1st and 4th Divisions through the little hamlet during the day and northward until they reached the Savannah Road--now vacated by the 17th Corps. The 2nd and 3rd Divisions camped at Summerville.

Sherman now had three of his corps plus his cavalry north of the river. Even though there had been no opposition along the line of the Ogeechee, this deployment remained advantageous. It was clear that Wheeler's effort was almost totally employed against the Union left flank. Placing the

*Brig. Gen. W. P. Carlin's 1st Division.

**Now Midville, Georgia.

17th Corps astride the railroad freed the 20th Corps from this task and readied the entire left wing and the cavalry for employment against Wheeler and Bragg, if the latter attempted to move south from Augusta. It also favored the 15th Corps, allowing Howard to bring part of it up onto the best road south of the river--improving speed of movement and the availability of forage. At the same time, the 15th Corps, marching along the right side of the river, could be used to turn any opposition along the line of the railroad as the army closed on Savannah.

Throughout these days in the wilderness, in spite of less abundant food and forage, the 15th Corps had been the grateful recipient of hundreds of horses, mules and cattle. Much of this stock had been driven south from the areas around the railroad and the Ogeechee River by their owners, or by Wheeler's cavalry--in the vain hope of herding them out of Sherman's path. The droves of cattle which were following the 15th Corps now began to swell in numbers, and tired mules and horses were exchanged for fresh ones as the swamps and sloughs took their toll.

Another factor which began to affect the army at this stage of the march were the huge numbers of Negro slaves who were following each corps. Freed by Sherman's progress through Georgia, many had simply left their masters--believing the Union army was delivering them from bondage, at last. For the 15th Corps, moving through some of the poorest areas, there were not as many slaves to take advantage of the opportunity. But for the left wing the problem was much more severe. It was

estimated that more than 14,000 men, women, and children joined the 14th and 20th Corps during the march. Of these, more than half marched all the way to Savannah.³⁵

As the 17th Corps completed its crossing on the morning of December 1st, Howard continued to move the 15th Corps in two columns. The 1st and 4th Divisions along with most of the trains moved on the Savannah Road keeping in close communication with the 17th Corps on the opposite river bank. The 2nd and 3rd Divisions moved east from Summerville on a road parallel and south of the Savannah Road. Howard intended to use these two roads until they formed a junction some 70 miles east at Station 2, Eden. (Map B)

The 29th Missouri Infantry Regiment (mounted) was used to maintain contact between the columns and Howard had decided to move with the upper column to facilitate communication with Sherman, accompanying the 17th Corps. On December 2nd and 3rd, brigades from Woods' and Corse's divisions crossed the river to destroy segments of the railroad and Howard used the 29th Missouri to cross and scout far in advance of the 17th Corps.

As the 15th Corps marched undetected down the right bank, the remaining three corps continued a steady but slower advance. The 17th Corps moved into Millen on December 2nd. To his disappointment, Sherman had earlier learned that all Union prisoners held here at Camp Lawton had been removed by Confederate authorities. Nevertheless, Sherman took particular pains to destroy the railroad, warehouses and the depot at

Millen while the left wing destroyed the railroad northward towards Waynesboro.

As news came on Dec. 2, that Sherman had entered Millen, Hardee, Bragg and Wheeler remained unaware of the movements of the 15th Corps. Major General Wayne with militia forces and some of McClaw's men had made his headquarters along the railroad at Station 4.5 (Ogeechee Church). Having been forced to withdraw from Ball's Ferry and unable to offer resistance at Sebastopol or Millen, he had chosen to make his stand here. This line was an obvious choice as it offered the narrowest distance between the Savannah and Ogeechee rivers. (Map B)

With about 2,000 men, some cavalry, and a few pieces of artillery, Wayne prepared earthworks on the eastern side of Little Ogeechee Creek, burning the railroad bridge at that point and weakening the bridge of the main dirt road. Trees were felled across the road and a double line of works was constructed further back from the creek and to the rear of a nearby house.³⁶

On Dec. 4, as the 15th Corps was approaching Wayne's position on the opposite side of the Ogeechee River, the 29th Missouri (mounted), commanded by Lt. Col Joseph S. Gage, crossed the river and ran into rebel pickets. Outnumbered and nearly surrounded, Gage retreated along the north bank of the river and was reinforced at Station 5 (Halcyondale) by cavalry operating in advance of the 17th Corps.³⁷ During the remainder of the day, Wayne's pickets were driven back to Station 4.5 and the Union cavalry was able to report that a sizeable Confederate

force was positioned on Ogeechee Creek. Sherman and the 17th Corps halted for the night at station 5.5 (Cameron)--about 10 miles north of Wayne's defenses.³⁸ But the upper column of the 15th Corps, considerably in advance of forces on the north bank, encamped nearly opposite the Confederate position on the night of December 4th. (Map B)

Dependent on the railroad for his communications and his withdrawal, Wayne could not afford to risk being cut off. The sudden appearance of the 29th Missouri from the south bank earlier in the day and evidence of larger forces nearly abreast of him on the opposite bank must have been alarming. From prisoners captured during the day's skirmishing Wayne learned that two corps were marching on either side of the Ogeechee.³⁹ This information was relayed to Hardee in Savannah.

Coincidentally, on the same day (Dec. 4th) the lower column of the 2nd and 3rd Divisions was also discovered, when foragers from the main column were attacked by several regiments of Wheeler's cavalry at Statesboro. Driving what was left of the foraging party before them, Wheeler's men ran into the advance brigade of Hazen's 2nd Division about three miles west of the town. The lead regiment of the advance brigade was the 70th Ohio, guarding the pioneer battalion which was corduroying the road. This regiment fired a volley into the approaching cavalry forcing them to retreat--leaving their dead and wounded on the field. The rebels carried off several of the foragers as prisoners--some of whom they allegedly killed.⁴⁰ The lower column continued its march camping at Statesboro on the night of Dec. 4th.

North, at station 4.5, Wayne decided to withdraw. With the upper column of the 15th Corps certain to get below him during the next day's march, he had little choice. By dawn on December 5th, the bulk of his force was gone--leaving only a line of pickets at the Little Ogeechee Creek. Blair's 17th Corps brushed these aside and marched through station 4.5 by mid-morning, and all three corps north of the river continued their advance down the narrowing peninsula toward Savannah.

By December 6th, the implications of the skirmishing at Statesboro and at station 4.5 could no longer be ignored. From captured prisoners, Hardee identified the force south of the river as the 15th Corps--with Howard in command.⁴¹ Continued delaying actions along the railroad were doomed. With Howard sweeping down the south bank, ten miles in advance of Sherman's main body, every attempt to delay would end in a repeat of the events at station 4.5. Only where the line of the river and the railroad finally diverged, at station no. 1 (Pooler), could another stand be made.

Any thoughts to the contrary were nullified that same day (Dec. 6th) as Howard ordered a brigade* from Woods' 1st Division to cross the Ogeechee at the site of Wright's bridge, with the aim of reaching the railroad at station 2 (Eden). Finding the bridge burned, this brigade crossed the 25th Iowa and part of the 9th Iowa regiment to seize a foothold on the far side. After some skirmishing, three companies of the 9th Iowa were able to reach the railroad before they were repulsed.⁴²

*Colonel James A Williamson's 3rd Brigade.

On the morning of the 7th, this brigade moved down the north bank toward station 2, and concurrently, Corse's Division forced a crossing at Jenk's bridge (Map B) in order to move against the railroad from the west. Rebel infantry disputed Corse's crossing until a battery of artillery was brought up in support. The enemy withdrew from the woods along the river to barricades and railworks which were separated from the woods by an open field. Corse's 1st brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Elliott W. Rice, crossed the river on pontoons and cleared the woods, arriving at the field which was overlooked by the rebel barricades.

Rice sent a force to attack the left flank of the enemy position, but the men in their front could not be held back--charging across the open field and over the top of the rebel works.* Killing and capturing about 25 of the enemy, Rice's men pushed on toward station no. 2, pursuing the bulk of the Confederate force which managed to escape down the railroad on a train.⁴³ The brigade from Woods' division also arrived at station no. 2, having met little resistance in its march south from Wright's bridge. Both brigades camped astride the railroad at station 2 that night (Dec. 7th)--ten miles in advance of Blair's 17th Corps.

The remainder of the 15th Corps had not been idle. While the action at Wright's and Jenk's bridge was underway, the 3rd

*Men of the 2nd and 9th Iowa Regiments.

Brigade from Hazen's 2nd division, commanded by Colonel John M. Oliver, was ordered to march to the Cannouchee River. If this river could be crossed the way would be open to the Gulf Railroad, to King's Bridge on the Ogeechee, and to Fort McAllister--the only obstacle between Sherman and the U.S. Navy.

Oliver's men ran into rebel pickets at Black Creek. Skirmishing for 12 miles, the Brigade arrived on the Cannouchee River near Bryan Court House. While the enemy prevented Oliver's brigade from crossing the river on the 8th, the skirmishing was so heavy that the defenders were unable to destroy the 600 feet of bridging at that point. That evening, Major General Osterhaus, commander of the 15th Corps, arrived with the 1st and 2nd Divisions. Artillery was brought forward and employed during the night. The next morning, the Confederates had withdrawn.⁴⁴

While Osterhaus was moving down the south bank of the Ogeechee, Howard accompanied Corse's Division down the north bank toward the Ogeechee Canal. This move was designed to threaten Wayne's left flank at Pooler (station 1) and to secure the opposite end of King's Bridge. Corse also skirmished steadily on the 8th, but gained the Savannah Canal by nightfall and broke through to King's Bridge and the Gulf Railroad on the 9th.

Also on Dec. 9th, Blair's 17th Corps engaged Wayne about two miles west of station no. 1. Wayne's position was well-sited, taking advantage of a swamp which channeled the Union advance.

Nevertheless, in spite of obstacles and torpedoes buried in the road, the rebels were unable to delay the advance more than a few hours.⁴⁵ By early afternoon (9 Dec.) Blair was able to move through Pooler, and Wayne's men withdrew to the inner defenses of Savannah.

The 10th of December found Sherman in control of all three railroads into Savannah. The 14th and 20th Corps, delayed by the many trees and other obstacles found along the roads, were moving to determine the strength of the cities' defense between the Savannah River and the Georgia Railroad. As Sherman shifted his corps southward to begin preparations for the siege of Savannah, it became clear that the most immediate objective was to establish a new base. The army was running out of food.

By seizing King's Bridge and the area between the Big and Little Ogeechee Rivers, the 15th Corps had opened the way to Fort McAllister--the only obstacle between Sherman's Army and the ships under the command of Admiral Dahlgren. Fort McAllister guarded the mouth of the Ogeechee River and had resisted attacks from the seaward approaches for three years. The Ogeechee River was navigable all the way to King's Bridge. If Fort McAllister could be taken, Sherman's Army could be resupplied and the siege of Savannah could be undertaken almost at leisure--its outcome nearly a foregone conclusion.

But with each day, the Army's food and forage dwindled. Not only was the Army static--unable to move to find new sources of food, but now there was very little to be had. Since about the 8th of December, all of Sherman's corps had entered the

tidewater region of Georgia--given over mostly to the cultivation of rice in the low swampy countryside. While rice was plentiful at first, it had to be hulled by hand before it was cooked--a difficult and laborious process. One man hulling rice for half a day could prepare enough for two meals.⁴⁶

This was known as "the starving time" in Sherman's Army.⁴⁷ Units which had arrived in front of Savannah with extra rations in their wagons redistributed these among the commands.⁴⁸ Men in the ranks resorted to live oak acorns, oysters, and rice. The herds of beef cattle which had followed the various corps became a chief source of food, and the slaughter was so large and frequent that commanders became concerned with sanitary conditions in the camps.⁴⁹

In the late afternoon of December 13th, Hazen's 2nd Division of the 15th Corps stormed Fort McAllister. Three Brigades charged through buried torpedoes, ditches and other obstacles to fight hand to hand along the parapets. In less than 30 minutes, the 250 defenders were overwhelmed and Fort McAllister was in Union hands. Sherman, who had watched the assault from the top of a rice mill some two miles distant, communicated with the fleet the same day.

Still, it would be several more days before the area around King's Bridge could be built up to receive the tons of supplies destined for the army. On December 17th the "cracker line", as the soldiers called it, was reestablished and rations reached the troops for the first time in eight days.

The March to the Sea had ended. In the days following, Sherman's Army prepared for a siege of Savannah. But Hardee had already begun to make preparations to abandon the city. As Sherman was returning from Hilton Head, S.C., where he had been planning the movement of troops against Hardee's rear, he received the news that Savannah had been evacuated. On December 21st, the Union army marched into the city.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions

In the absence of an opposing army, Sherman's success depended on the ability of his army to move and to subsist off the land. Had Bragg, Hardee, or Wheeler been able to affect Sherman's ability to do either of these--the outcome may have been different.

But from the beginning of the march, Sherman's strategy had served to divide and confuse the opposition. The feints toward Macon and Augusta worked masterfully to keep Confederate forces off balance and at bay. The movement of the 17th Corps north of the Ogeechee, the failure to detect the movement of the 15th Corps south of that river, and Foster's movements in South Carolina were coincident events which prolonged Confederate indecision for five critical days (30 Nov.- 4 Dec.).

Wheeler demonstrated that his concentrated force could be effective against Sherman's left--forcing Kilpatrick's cavalry to seek the protection of the infantry. For a short time, Wheeler was able to harass the 14th Corps to such a degree that foragers were unable to search for food.*

* On November 30th, Major General Jefferson C. Davis, commander of the 14th Corps wrote to Slocum that Wheeler's Cavalry had repeatedly demonstrated against his flanks, and while every attack had been repulsed, the effect was that "our foragers are circumscribed to the limits of the picket lines; so the general commanding will see the necessity of our getting out of this soon." (Official Records, Vol. 44, p.582.)

But with only a brigade of cavalry and the militia left to operate in front of the Union army, and the 15th Corps free to swiftly turn every position along the railroad--the outcome was predictable. How much more effective Wheeler could have been had he operated against the 15th Corps--isolated and divided as it was in the scantily supplied areas south of the Ogeechee--can only be surmised.

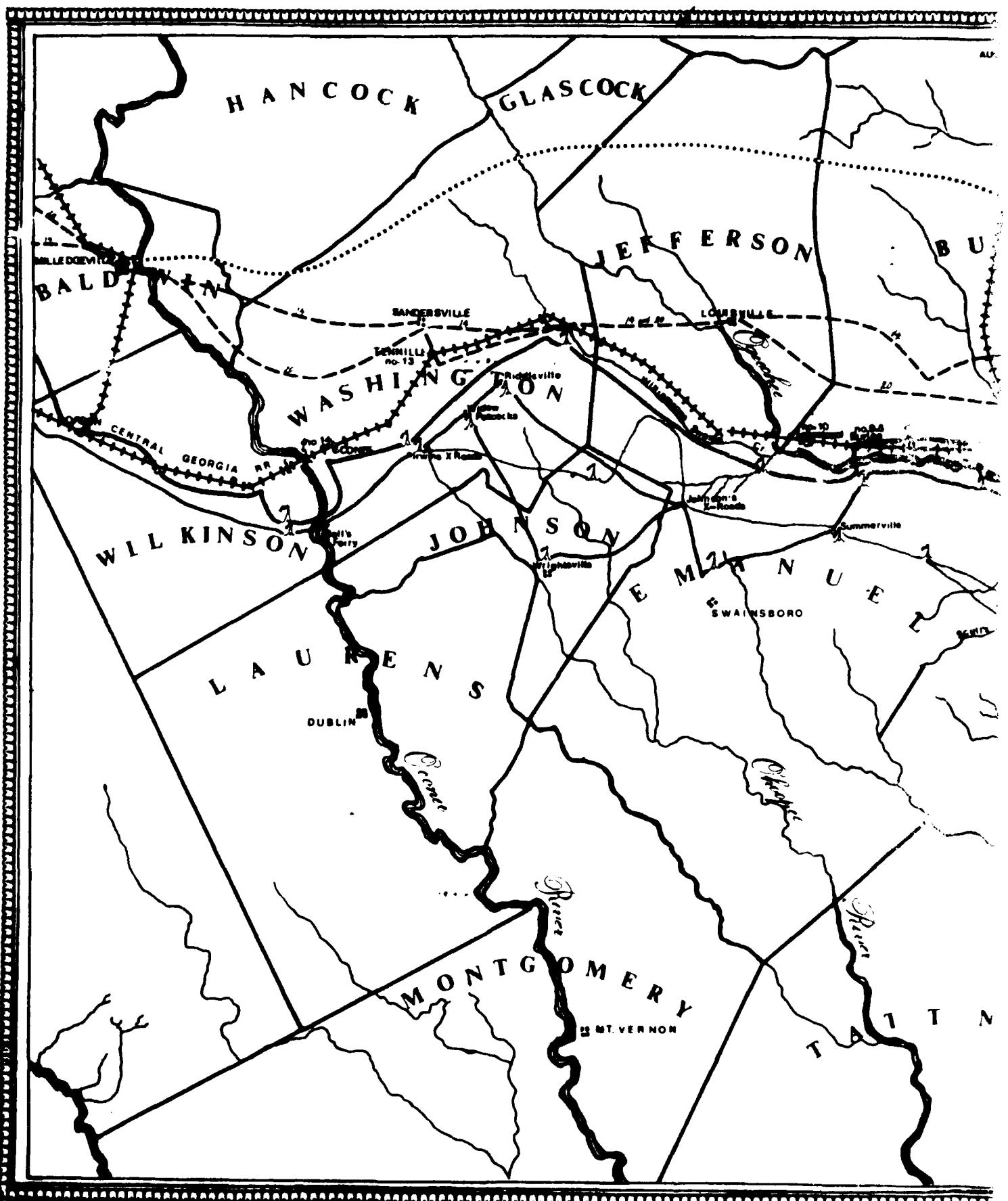
But assuming that Bragg could have fended off Kilpatrick's raids at Augusta, it is likely that this strategy would have produced greater delays for Sherman. And, in retrospect, delay was what Sherman's Army could least afford. Successful delays along the midpoint of the march would have intensified "the starving time" in the tidewater region. Had Sherman's men arrived in front Savannah with empty wagons instead of full ones, Jefferson Davis' predictions for the march may have proved true.

In the end, it was the right wing--and particularly the 15th Corps which had most nearly experienced the kind of march which Davis had predicted. And it was these men, many of whom were veterans from Sherman's old command at Shiloh, who had proved Davis wrong. Marching for over one hundred miles through a remote and difficult region, subsisting from some of the poorest areas of the state, they emerged in advance of the army to swiftly unhinge Confederate positions at Ogeechee Church, Eden, and King's Bridge. Forcing the rapid contraction of Savannah's defenses, they isolated and stormed Fort McAllister, making possible the early resupply of Sherman's army--33 days after leaving Atlanta.

Sherman must have had the 15th Corps in mind when he wrote to Army Chief of Staff General Henry Halleck from Savannah on December 24th. Asking Halleck to pass on congratulations to Thomas for the defeat of Hood at Nashville, he then urged that if Thomas would pursue Hood, even into Mississippi and Alabama, he could expect little difficulty feeding his army, writing: "... in the poorest sections of Georgia I found no trouble subsisting my army and animals".¹ And on the same day, in a letter to Major General Montgomery Meigs, Quartermaster General of the Army, he continued:

In almost any part of the south, armies of 30,000 to 50,000 may safely march sure to find near their route forage of some kind or other... it will not be long before I sally forth again and I² feel no uneasiness whatever on the score of forage."

It had been the right wing which had validated Sherman's novel concept: that now, Union armies could move at will, through the heart of the Confederacy, free of their lines of supply, bringing the horrors and deprivations of war to every door. The implications for the South were devastating. Five months later, the war was over.



1 of 2

D.45

The Operations of Sherman's Right Wing (15th & 17th Corps)
In Georgia from November 23rd to December 13th

During

THE MARCH TO THE SEA 1864

ROUTES OF THE RIGHT WING

15th CORPS

Upper Column (1st & 4th Divisions) ----- 1

Lower Column (2nd & 3rd Divisions) ----- 2

17th CORPS

----- 3

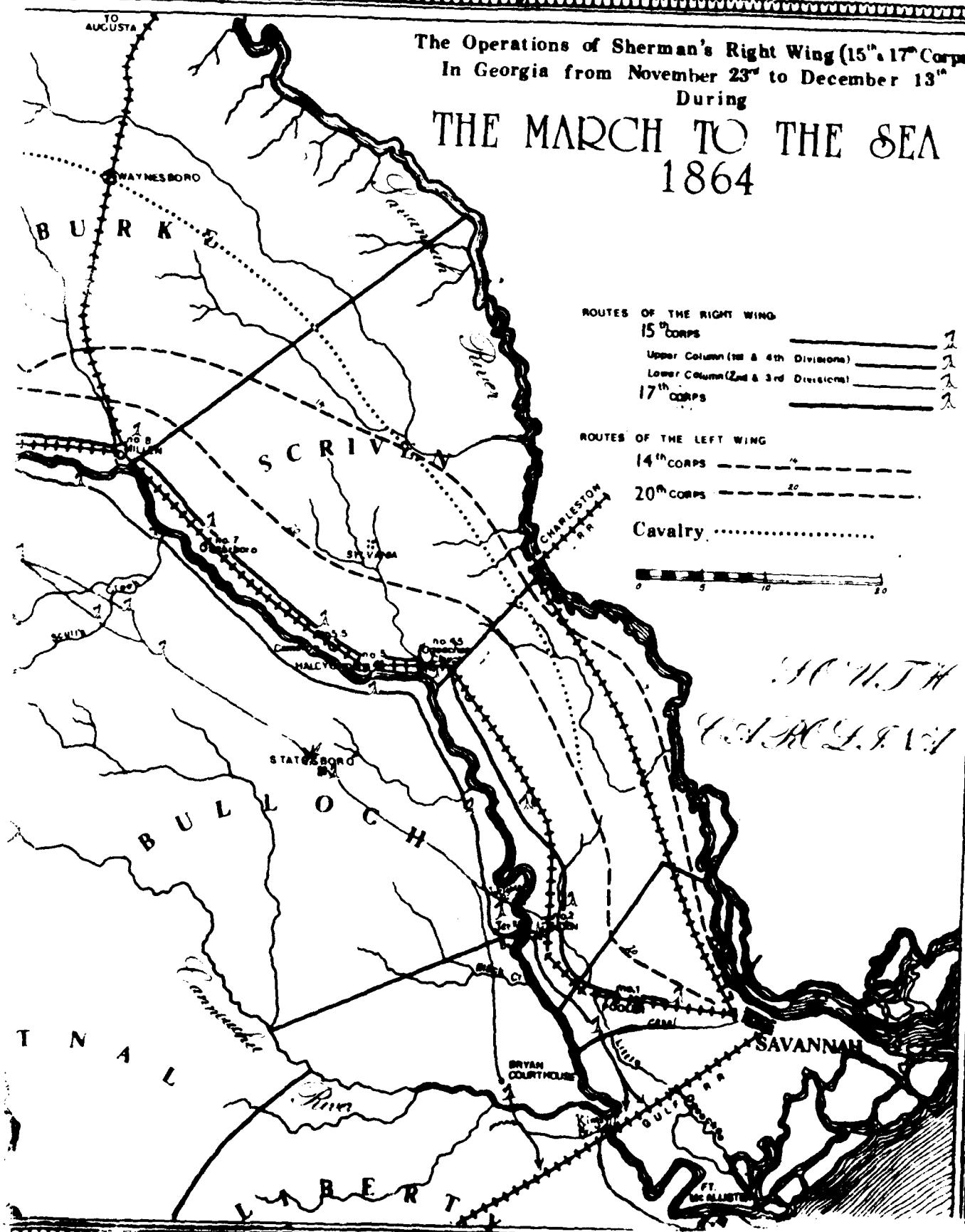
ROUTES OF THE LEFT WING

14th CORPS ----- 4

20th CORPS ----- 5

Cavalry 6

Scale: 0 5 10 20



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APPENDIX I

THE GEORGIA AGRICULTURAL MAP OF 1861*

This large map was supplied to General Sherman by Joseph C. Kennedy, Chief of the Census Bureau. It contained, for each county, detailed production figures encompassing livestock food, and forage. Population figures, including the number of military men (aged 18-45), and the number of slaves in each county were included. This data was overprinted on each county as it appeared on the map.

The information below has been extracted from this map for the Georgia counties which lay in the path of Sherman's left and right wing during the period 23 November to 10 December, 1864. The left wing was more abundantly supplied than the right--demonstrating the contrast between the areas north and south of the Ogeechee River.

Left Wing (14th & 20th Corps)

COUNTIES	Whites	Slaves	Horses	Cattle	Swine	Bu. Corn & Wheat
Baldwin	4,057	4,929	1,599	6,420	16080	227,734 7,705
Washington	6,143	6,532	3,437	12,870	37352	432,839 28,009
Jefferson	4,133	6,045	2,828	8,571	27241	347,390 21,602
Burke	5,013	12,052	4,871	16,379	38402	703,842 38,402
Screven	3,742	4,530	2,177	13,627	22574	264,407 287
TOTALS:	23,088	34,088	14,912	57,877	141649	1,976,212 96,005

Right Wing (15th and 17th Corps)

COUNTIES	Whites	Slaves	Horses	Cattle	Swine	Bu. Corn & Wheat
Wilkinson	5,472	3,887	2,363	7,972	26913	320,297 19,217
Johnson	2,063	849	*	*	*	*
Emanuel	3,748	1,294	1,602	16,654	22699	151,504 3,972
Bulloch	3,506	2,162	1,575	15,400	22287	138,117 98
TOTALS	14,789	8,192	5,540	40,026	71899	609,918 23,277

* A copy of this map is held by the Cartographic Branch of the National Archives in Washington, D.C. (Record Group 77, U.S. 266 roll). Production figures for Johnson County were not included as the county was formed in 1858, mostly from Emanuel County. They are probably reflected in the totals for Emanuel.

NOTES

Chapter I

1. For the routes and encampments of the various divisions of the 15th and 17th Corps see F. Edward Schwabe, "Sherman's March: A Reappraisal of the Right Wing," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, Winter, 1986. (in press)
2. Harvey M. Trimble, ed. The History of the 93rd Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry, (Chicago: 1898), p. 248.
3. Davis spoke at Augusta, Macon and several other Georgia towns in early October, 1864. He likened Sherman's intended movement from Atlanta to Napolean's retreat from Moscow-- predicting that the Union Army would disintegrate. A portion of the text of Davis' address at Macon is reprinted in Richard Wheeler's Sherman's March, (New York: 1978), pp. 49-50.

Chapter II

1. Mills Lane, ed., War is Hell! William T. Sherman's Personal Narrative of His March through Georgia, (Savannah, Ga.: 1974),
2. Ibid., p. 139.
3. Ibid., p. 140.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 140-41.
6. Ibid., p. 86.
7. Ibid., p. 94.

Chapter III

1. Richard Wheeler, Sherman's March, (New York: 1978), p. 89.
2. Report of Brigadier General Orlando Poe, Chief Engineer, Military Division of the Mississippi, 8 October, 1865, in The War of Rebellion. The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (hereafter referred to as OR) Vol. 44, p. 59.
3. Mills Lane, ed. War Is Hell!, p. 4.

4. Ibid., pp. 143-45.
5. Ibid., p. 145.
6. Ibid.
7. In a letter dated 15 August, 1865, Sherman thanked Kennedy for the maps stating: "The closing scenes of our recent war demonstrated [their value]... without them I could not have undertaken what was done. To you personally I freely confess my great sense of obligation." From Book of letters Sent, Military Division of the Mississippi, Vol IV, July 5, 1864 to August 10, 1866. In Record Group 98 (Record of the Army Commands), The National Archives, Washington, D.C.
8. Most general accounts of the march describe the great abundance of food available for all of Sherman's Army. But a close examinations of the diaries and narratives of the soldiers in the ranks will show that there were two occasions of scant food and forage. The first affected primarily the members of the 15th Corps during the period 26 Nov.-1 Dec., south of the Ogeechee River; the second affected more or less the entire army as it lay static before Savannah. See Alonzo L. Brown, The History of the 4th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, p. 344, and John K. Duke, The History of the 53rd Regiment, Ohio, Volunteer Infantry, p. 166.
9. Jacob D. Cox, The March to the Sea: Franklin and Nashville, (New York: 1890), pp. 27-28.
10. Beauregard to Cooper, Nov. 16, 1864, O.R., Vol. 44, p. 859.
11. Ibid., p. 866.
12. Hardee to McClaws, 21 November, 1864, O.R., Vol. 44, p. 877.
13. John K. Duke, History of the 53rd Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry, (Portsmouth, Ohio: 1906), p. 162.
14. Cox, p. 38-42.
15. Oliver O. Howard, Autobiography of Oliver O. Howard, (New York: 1907) vol.2, p. 80.
16. Special Field Orders no. 176, O.R. vol. 44, pp. 528-29.
17. Report of Brigadier General Giles A. Smith, O.R., vol. 44, p. 154.
18. Report of Major General Frank Blair, 17th Corps, O.R., vol. 44, p. 147.
19. Howard to Blair, O.R., vol 44, p. 530.

20. Irwin to McClaws, 19 Nov., 1864, O.R., vol. 44, p. 530.
21. Hartridge to Elliott, 21 Nov., 1864, O.R., vol. 44, p. 879.
22. Report of Captain Henry Duncan, 53rd Indiana Regiment, O.R., vol. 44, p. 155.
23. Report of Major General O.O. Howard, O.R., vol. 44, p. 68.
24. Hitchcock to Howard, O.R., vol. 44, p. 555.
25. Special Order no. 184, HQ., 15th Army Corps, 27 Nov., 1864, O.R., vol. 44, p. 557.
26. Charles Wills, Army Life of an Illinois Soldier, (Washington, D.C.: 1906), p. 328.
27. W.H. Chamberlain, History of the 81st Ohio, (Cincinnati: 1865), p. 151.
28. D.L. Ambrose, History of the 7th Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry, (Springfield, Illinois: 1868), p. 281.
29. Report of messenger captured, Howard to Sherman, O.R., vol. 44, p. 578.
30. Orders from Hardee [through Wayne] to Wheeler, 29 Nov., 1864, O.R., vol. 44, pp. 906-07.
31. Hardee to Beauregard, O.R. Vol. 44, p. 903.
32. In a dispatch to Bragg dated 8 December, 1864, Wheeler placed the 15th Corps "on the middle ground road", north of the Ogeechee. (See Wheeler to Bragg, 8 Dec., 1864, in O.R., vol. 44, p. 941). This was actually the route of the 20th Corps. On the day this dispatch was written, the 15th Corps was concentrating on the south bank, opposite Eden, having already captured the depot at station no.2, and already underway towards King's Bridge.
33. Sherman to Howard, 27 Nov., 1864, O.R., vol. 44, p. 555.
34. Rogers to Davis, O.R., vol. 44, p. 575.
35. Report of Major General Henry Slocum, commanding left wing, O.R., vol. 44, p. 159.
36. Henry Hitchcock, Marching With Sherman, (New Haven, Conn.: 1927), pp. 142-48.

37. Report of Lt. Col. Dennis Kirby on Operations of 4 Dec., 1864, in O.R., vol. 44, p.104.
38. Hitchcock, p. 136.
39. Hardee to Cooper, 4 Dec., 1864, O.R. vol. 44, p. 927.
40. See Grecian, History of the 83rd Indiana, p. 64, and Saunier, History of the 47th Ohio, p. 359.
41. Hardee to Cooper, 6 and 7 Dec., 1864, O.R., vol.44, pp. 933 and 938.
42. Report of Maj. Gen. Charles Woods, commanding 1st Division, 15th Corps, O.R., vol. 44, p. 100.
43. Report of Brig. General Elliott Rice, O.R., vol. 44, p. 129.
44. Report of Colonel John M. Oliver, 3rBrigade, 2nd Division, 15th Corps, O.R., vol. 44, p. 121.
45. Hitchcock, pp. 160-165.
46. See Jesse Macy, An Autobiography, p. 58; also Mathew H. Jamison, Recollections of Pioneer and Army Life, pp. 287-89; and Mildred Throne, ed., "A History of Company D, 11th Iowa, 1851-65," pp. 78-79, in Iowa Journal of History.
47. Ibid.
48. Report of Brig. Gen. William P. Hazen, commanding 2nd Division, 15th Corps, O.R., vol. 44, pp. 111.
49. "Letters Received and Issued and Reports of Divisions and Brigades," 15th Army Corps Letter Book, Record Group 393, #5887, vol. 2. The National Archives Washington, D.C.

Chapter V.

1. Sherman to Halleck, Dec. 24, 1864, Letters Sent in the Field, Headquarters, Military Division of the Mississippi, May, 1864-Jan.,1865.
2. Ibid., Sherman to Meigs.

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